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# Thesis Preparation Tips

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# Thesis Preparation Tips

*Good writing is clear thinking made visible.* — Bill Wheeler

## Before you begin

1. **Word processor choices:** Most thesis writer at NPS use Microsoft Word to prepare their theses. Alternatives include other word processors and L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X.
2. **Greek and math symbols and equations:** NPS has a site license for MathType. (MathType is a stronger version of the Equation Editor program found in MS Word. It allows inline math, full math and Greek symbols, auto-numbered equations, auto-numbered references to Equations, as well as other features. All ECE thesis writer should use MathType as Word add-in. (Do not attempt to type in equations using just MS Word; use the MathType add-in for all math.)
3. **Paragraph justification:** The NPS default thesis style for MS Word is set for full justification with hyphenation turned off. This results in ugly white spaces. ECE theses can either be left-justified or use full justification with the hyphenation turned on.
4. **Thesis tone:** A thesis is a formal scientific document. As such, it is inappropriate to use slang, superlatives, hyperbole, contractions, and other forms of informal language.
5. **Tense:** The thesis is generally written in the past and present tense.

The goals were to design and build the circuit, to measure the circuit's frequency response, . . . . The tested circuit is shown in Fig. 5. It was unsuccessful, so the revised circuit of Fig. 6 was built. It met the desired goals. Equation 7 describes the theory and says that. . .

6. **Sentences:** Only one thought per sentence, please. Only skilled writers should exceed this amount.
7. **Chapter transitions:** The end of each chapter (except the first and last chapters) should smoothly transition the reader into the next chapter. A few sentences should summarize the content of the current chapter and, then, a sentence or two should introduce what is to be covered in the next chapter. Similarly, each chapter should begin with a short overview of the Chapter's content.
8. **Footnotes** are not usually used in engineering technical literature. They should be included only when necessary for presenting *important* explanatory material whose inclusion in the text would be distracting.<sup>1</sup>
9. **Figures from other sources:** It is permissible to use figures scanned from other sources *as long as the source is acknowledged with a reference citation in the caption*. If the figure is copied directly, then the citation should indicate "From Ref. 5."; if the figure is a close replica, but is slightly modified, then the citation should indicate "After Ref. 5."

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<sup>1</sup>Although the footnote is usually even *more* distracting.

10. **Explanation of figures:** All but the simplest of figures should be discussed in the text. In particular, figures showing results must be discussed. It is *not* sufficient to present results in figures without discussing them.
11. **Graphs with multiple data sets:** Some graphs plot more than one data set on a single graph, e.g., with crosses, circles, or other markers, or might plot the data along with a theoretical prediction curve. It is important to identify each of the data sets or curves. This identity can be done in a legend that is incorporated into the figure or in the caption. (If the identification is so complicated that a caption is unwieldy, then the identification can be done in the text. The caption should then indicate that the identification of the data is discussed in the text.)
12. **Graphs with lines and data points:** Graphs that contain both lines and data points need an explanation on how the lines were obtained. Generally, there are three possibilities:
  - (a) the lines merely connect the data points,
  - (b) the lines are fit to the data points (be sure to describe the fitting method), or
  - (c) the lines are plots of the theoretical equations with the data points superimposed.
13. **Punctuation of equations:** You are expected to punctuate equations with periods or commas after the equation, as necessary.

## While you are writing

1. **Abstract:** The abstract of the thesis is a summary of the work performed (*not an introduction*). It must be substantive in nature, presenting concisely the objectives of the work, the methodology used, the results obtained, and the significance of those results. Avoid using the passive voice exclusively in the abstract.
2. **Equations:** *Every* display equation, i.e., equations not in a line of text, must be numbered sequentially. The sequential numbering can either be within a chapter, e.g., 1-1, 1-2, . . . , 2-1, 2-2, . . . , or sequentially throughout the entire thesis, e.g., 1, 2, 3, . . . . MathType is able to automatically number the equations (and, more importantly, adjust the numbering when other equations are added in editing). If you use the equation referencing in MathType, the references to the equation numbers will be updated as well.
3. **References** must be numbered consecutively in the order of their first appearance. Citations such as *ibid.*, *op. cit.*, etc., are never used in the technical literature; the reference number is reused. References are collected at the end of the text in a list following the format examples shown below. References must be complete. In particular, journal articles must include the starting and finishing page numbers.
4. **Reference format:** The purpose of the reference citations is to allow the interested reader (or a reference librarian acting on the reader's behalf) to find the original source material. To aid in the electronic search of databases, citations must be complete and accurate. The format used for citations varies with disciplines. The format examples shown below are used frequently in the Electrical Engineering field. They are taken from the formats presented in the January issue of the *Proceedings of the IEEE*. If you have any questions about reference formats, consult with your adviser (or second reader) or the Department Chair.

The authors' names should be in the same format as appears in the source document. If the author uses his/her full name, the citation must use his/her full name. If the author uses initials instead, the citation must use initials.

The following are examples of suitable formats:

- A book  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, *Serendipity in Science*, Vol. 2, pp. 25–34, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2001.  
Note: The book title should be in *italics*. The publisher, city (and state or country, for small cities), and publication year should be included.
- A chapter in a book  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, “Serendipity in science and engineering,” in *Studies of Serendipity*, Thomas J. Smart, Jr., and C. M. Pigs, eds., pp. 86–100, Sunshine Press, Lake Wobegone, Minnesota, 2000.  
Notes: Only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized in the chapter title. The comma at the end of the title goes *inside* the closing quotation marks.
- A paper in a journal  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, “Serendipity in communications theory,” *IEEE Trans. on Communications*, Vol. C-25, No. 5, pp. 1045–1054, 2002.  
Notes: Only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized in the article title. The comma at the end of the title goes *inside* the close quotation marks. Journals have standard abbreviations that have been established by reference librarians, e.g., Trans. = Transactions, J. = Journal. If you are not sure of the standard abbreviation, write out the journal title in full. (It is better to provide excess information than not enough.) Include the journal volume, serial number, and the start and stop pages of the article.
- A paper in a published conference proceedings  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, “Serendipity in computer design,” *Proc. of 28th Asilomar Conf. on Circuits, Systems, and Computers*, Joseph Doe, ed., pp. 45–65, IEEE Press, New York, Pub. No. CG-456-88, 2002.
- An unpublished paper presented at a conference  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, “Serendipity in controls theory,” presented at the 12th International Symposium on Control Theory, New York, October 2001.  
Note: The exact dates of the conference are not necessary; the month and year will suffice.
- A technical report  
R. U. Cerius and I. M. Kidding, “Serendipity in the construction of the An/123,” Technical Report No. TR1234-89, Cerius Engineering, Inc., Kansas City, October 2001.
- A previous thesis  
R. U. Cerius, “Serendipity in military systems,” Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1999.
- Class notes  
I. M. Kidding, Notes for EC2999 (Introduction to Serendipity), Naval Postgraduate School, 2001 (unpublished).  
Notes: The indication that the notes are unpublished warns that the notes are not generally available and that it will be difficult for the reader to obtain a copy. Avoid the use of such a reference unless the referenced information is absolutely unavailable anywhere else.

- Phone conversation

R. U. Cerius in private telephone conversation, 20 June 1988.

Note: Avoid the use of such reference unless the referenced information is absolutely necessary to the thesis and is unavailable anywhere else.

- Conversation

R. U. Cerius, private conversation at Cerius Research, Inc., 20 July 1987.

Note: Avoid the use of such reference unless the referenced information is absolutely necessary to the thesis and is unavailable anywhere else.

5. **Abbreviations** for *Figure* and *Reference* can be used *except when beginning a sentence*.

... as seen in Fig. 5.

... as found in Ref. 3.

Figure 5 shows that ...

Reference 5 has shown that ...

6. **Symbols at start of sentence:** Do *not* begin a sentence with a symbol.

*Incorrect* –  $\theta$  should be between  $5^\circ$  and  $10^\circ$ .

*Correct* – The angle  $\theta$  should be between  $5^\circ$  and  $10^\circ$ .

7. **Leading zero:** A decimal value looks best when a zero precedes the decimal point, e.g., "...value is 0.567." reads easier than "...value is .567."

8. **Abbreviations:** Do *not* put a period after common abbreviations such as ac, Hz, MHz, mA,  $\mu\text{F}$ , etc.

9. **Input and output** are *nouns*. Do *not* use them as verbs.

10. **Hyphens, ems, ens, and minus signs:** Those who use a word processor in engineering and science have to worry about the length of the lines that appear as hyphens, etc. There are usually four choices:

(a) a short hyphen (-) used to join short phrases such as "*i*-th".

(b) a longer one (–) used to form compound modifiers such as "...second–order effect.". (It is called an *en* because it is usually the width of an *n* character).

(c) a longer one (—) used to separate phrases or for other purposes such as "...at (831) 555—1212." (Called an *em* because it is the width of an *m* character).

(d) a mathematical minus sign (−) used in math text and display equations, such as "...is  $-5 \text{ m}\cdot\text{s}$ ".

Be sure to use the right one!! (In particular, do NOT use a short hyphen to represent a minus sign in mathematical text. It should be "...answer is  $-5$ "; not "...answer is -5".)

11. **Variable list after equation:** Do NOT capitalize "where" in introducing a list of variables after an equation. (Also be sure that the line is not indented after the equation.)

Example: The equation for  $a$  is given by

$$a = b + c \tag{1}$$

where  $a$  is the first variable,  $b$  is the second variable, and  $c$  is the third variable.

## Miscellaneous Points of Grammar

1. **It, its, and it's:** *Its* is the possessive of it; *it's* is a contraction of *it is*. (Contractions are not allowed in a thesis, so “it's” should *never* appear in a thesis.)

Be careful using the word *it*; be sure that the word being referred to is clear.

2. **Contractions:** Do *not* use any contractions (it's, don't, can't, won't, etc.) in a thesis. Spell out words completely (e.g., it is, do not, cannot, will not, etc.).

3. **Compound-word modifiers:** Compounds that modify a noun should be hyphenated. A frequently-applied test is to split the compound into two and apply each individually.

Example: ...into a two-stage amplifier. (It is a “two” amplifier? Is it a “stage” amplifier? If either test fails, then a hyphen is called for, as in this example.)

4. **Use of “i.e.” and “e.g.”:** The symbols are always followed by a comma and are preceded by either a comma or a left parenthesis.

...its weight, i.e., the mass times the acceleration due to gravity.

...its weight (i.e., the mass times the acceleration due to gravity).

5. **Excessive capitalization:** Do *not* capitalize Really Important Words. Emphasize words by *italics* (preferred) or **bold-face** (second choice).

6. **Commas:** Commas are used ...

- ...before the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *yet*, and *nor* when they join parts of a compound sentence.

The wave is continuous, but it increases in amplitude.

- ...to separate an introductory clause from the main part of a sentence.

When the paper appeared, it confirmed Fourier's theory.

- ...to separate items in a list.

“...oranges, apples, and pears.”

Note: It is also acceptable to omit the comma before the *and* in a list (although I prefer that it be present), e.g., “...oranges, apples and pears.”. Whichever way you choose, be consistent!!

- ...to set off parenthetical clauses in a sentence.

The curves prove, as careful study will show, that Fourier's theory is correct.

- ...to separate coordinate adjectives modifying a noun. (If you can substitute the word “and” for the comma, then the adjective is a *coordinate adjective*.)

The large, reflective, white target ...

- ...before and after a dependent clause that comes in the middle of a sentence.

The measurement, although it is in rough agreement with the theory, does not agree perfectly.

Note: A comma is followed by a single space and is *never* preceded by a space. Commas are like parentheses; whenever there is one, there is usually another (except when superseded by the start or the end of the sentence).

## 7. Misused commas:

- Do *not* use a comma to separate independent clauses that are not joined by a conjunction. (This is a “comma splice.”)  
*Incorrect* — The measurement follows the theory at low frequencies, however, it deviates from theory at frequencies above 100 MHz.  
*Correct* — The measurement follows the theory at low frequencies; however, it deviates from theory at frequencies above 100 MHz.
- Do *not* use a comma to set off restrictive phrases or clauses, i.e., phrases or clauses necessary to the words that they modify.  
*Incorrect* — The power supply, driving the oscillator, was incorrectly regulated.  
*Correct* — The power supply driving the oscillator was incorrectly regulated.
- Do *not* use a comma to separate a noun clause from its verb.  
*Incorrect* — That the data points agree with the theory, is evident.  
*Correct* — That the data points agree with theory is evident.

## 8. Semicolons: Many people misuse colons and semicolons. Semicolons are used ...

- ... to link two parts of a compound sentence when the conjunction, e.g., “and”, “or”, is not used.  
The value of  $A$  is 0.5; the value of  $B$  is 0.8.
- ... to separate independent clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs, i.e., *however, furthermore, nevertheless, consequently, also, besides, otherwise, accordingly, moreover, then, so*, etc.  
The low frequency data is in poor agreement; otherwise, the model seems to agree with the theory.
- ... to separate items in a list when one or more of the items has a comma in it. (This use is tricky; it is best to avoid it.)  
... consists of R, L, and C components; transistors and ICs; and wires, connectors, and sockets.

## 9. Colons are used ...

- ... to introduce a list of three or more items in a group. (A comma is used for a list of two items.)  
... consists of the following parts: an oscillator, an amplifier, a filter, and an antenna.  
... consists of the following parts, an oscillator and an amplifier.
- ... after a main clause when the succeeding clause(s) explains, illustrates, amplifies, or restates the first clause. (This usage is tricky; when in doubt, use a semicolon.)  
The circuit works as follows: the oscillator creates the sine wave and the amplifier strengthens it.

Colons are *not* used before display equations.

## 10. Variables set off by commas: When you use italics to identify math variables, it is not necessary to set off the variable by commas. (If you do set off one variable, then be consistent; all variables must be set off.)

The balance  $B$  is ... (preferred with italicized variables.)

The balance,  $B$ , is ... (OK, but do the same to *all* variables.)

The balance, B, is ... (required with unitalicized variables.)

## After you finish writing

1. Obtaining the Chair's signature is a multi-step process. Be sure to allow time for the full process.
  - The "smooth draft", signed by the student, advisor, and second reader, is left for review.
  - The Chair reviews the work (allow for up to five working days for this review) and suggest changes. If changes required are numerous, the thesis may be returned unfinished to allow the student to make the changes in both the reviewed pages and in the unreviewed pages before resubmission.
  - The student makes the required changes and resubmit the thesis. (Depending on the condition of the thesis, there may be more than one iteration of this review/change process.)
  - When the Chair is satisfied that all of the changes are satisfactory, he/she signs the thesis.

## References for writing:

W. Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd Ed., MacMillan Publishing Co., New York, 1979.

*Professor John Powers*  
*18 October 2002*